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GOLDEN NUMBERS: AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING LOVE OF POETRY TO HIGH-SCHOOL PUPILS

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The lyrics of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* have proved such a source of pure pleasure to some, and, I believe, to many of our high-school pupils, that I venture to describe a little experiment in fostering love of poetry which met with at least a measure of success. Such noble enjoyment was worth cultivating even in war times, when so much that was necessary for immediate practical purposes crowded upon our attention.

A youth who confided to his teacher that he loved to repeat these lyrics aloud as he busied himself over mechanical problems in his workshop, left school to enter the air service and specialized in pursuit flying. Every line of the lyrics once learned may have been forgotten in the stress of acquisition of knowledge which was to be a matter of life or death to him, and possibly of success or defeat to his flag; but is it not more than possible that a happy phrase, a lovely thought, from the poets, may sometimes have flashed into his mind and relieved the strain of an overtense moment, or given pleasure in an hour of rest?

Leisure-hour enjoyment and relief from tension are not, however, the chief reasons why the practical necessities of the times, either in war or in these days of reconstruction, should not crowd poetry out of the English course. The poet expresses for the boys and girls their own moods and feelings, which have been inarticulate and

only half understood by themselves, and reveals to them a richer life of thought and feeling into which they will later enter. All this is done with the artist's delicate touch and reverence for truth which appeal to the reticence of the young, who shrink from intrusion, but crave sympathetic guidance and with gratitude "follow the gleam."

Our experiment was first tried with a most responsive class. A number of them had good voices and loved music, and the melody of the lyrics appealed to them. There were others, however, with little ear for rhythm and with a fancied aversion for poetry, of which they were in reality quite ignorant. We determined to enlist the interest of even the most unresponsive of these, since "music hath charms to soothe the savage breast."

The work was planned so that there would be little burden upon the pupil outside of the classroom. The hour with the *Golden Treasury* was to come on the last day of the week, and the pupil was to be prepared to write and to recite one short poem which had been read to him the preceding week, or which he had chosen himself. This period was soon looked forward to as a time of pleasure and recreation after the more prosaic work of the week was over. In class the pupils spent a few minutes in writing the lines learned and reciting some lyrics they had all memorized, and they were then ready to listen while the teacher related a story or described a scene which gave the setting for a poem, which was read to them as soon as they were prepared to give it a sympathetic hearing. If the pupil really *hears* a poem of true worth, he almost invariably feels that worth and appreciates it more or less fully. When he "doesn't like poetry," it is because his hearing or reading has been merely perfunctory.

With the class in question, the story interest was relied upon mainly at first. A few had read *As You Like It*, and, with their gleefully proffered help, the story of the banished duke was given to the class. All were then ready to listen eagerly to "Under the Greenwood Tree." Then "Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind" gave us again the contrast between the artificiality of the court and the free life of the greenwood, and they were interested in a reference to the court of Elizabeth with its grace and gaiety, its

flatteries and jealousies. They helped fill in this picture from their own reading and were quick to imagine that Shakespeare might have undergone experiences in London town that made him long for the pleasures of the greenwood.

Now, to help them hear the music, we noticed the echo of bird notes in the "Come hither, come hither, come hither," and the class repeated it to make it as birdlike as possible.

"Has the other lyric a refrain?" "Yes, but not so directly imitative." "What does the refrain do for the poem?"

The pupils were quick to say that it sounded "jolly"—in other words, expressed a mood.

The music-lovers in the class found much pleasure for several weeks in looking over a book of *Fifty Shakespeare Songs* and then six or eight boys and girls volunteered to sing the lyrics mentioned and a number of others, in some cases using the Elizabethan musical setting. Adjourning to the high-school chapel where a piano was available, the class listened in delight for half an hour.

The suggestion of another song with a bird note in the refrain aroused the interest of the class in the lyric, from *Love's Labour's Lost*, "When icicles hang by the wall." Some were surprised to hear the owl's hoot called "a merry note." They were used to thinking of it as an eerie sound, possibly of evil omen. But they readily suggested that the hoot of the owl meant the cold shut out, to those who enjoyed the warmth and comfort indoors. A picture of Anne Hathaway's cottage showed the sort of thick thatch from which the icicles hung, and it was easy to imagine the great fireplace within.

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail—

How the children delight in the homeliness of it, for they have a feeling for the poetry of common things!

When blood is nipt and ways be foul—

How prompt they are to give us the Ohio phraseology for this—"The roads are bad"—the familiar words of our country pupils on winter mornings.

The class found the fanciful prettiness of Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" in delightful contrast to the realistic plainness of Shakespeare's "Winter." Stalwart shepherds dining from ivory tables, with dainty shepherdesses, adorned with ivy buds and coral clasps, were charmingly different from Shakespeare's Dick who warms his chilly fingers with his breath and finds within the cottage the glowing logs in the fire-place and the hot spiced drink, "when roasted crabs hiss in the bowl." But although the pupils laughed at the fanciful unrealities of Marlowe's "Shepherd," they liked the poem, nevertheless—that is, they had really listened to it and its charm had not escaped them.

And so the path to an attentive hearing for a poem was sometimes through the story interest; sometimes through notice drawn to the use of the refrain and, later, to different rhyming plans and other devices of the poet; sometimes through the likeness or contrast to some other lyric in which they were already interested.

The setting for Ariel's songs in the *Tempest* was built up by the class, some of whom had seen the play while others had read it or had read the story in Lamb's *Tales*. *Cymbeline*, on the contrary, was new to them all. Before reading that lyric of haunting beauty, "Fear no more the heat of the sun," they were told the story of the beautiful youth, Fidele, who rested wearied in the forest. The two boys, stolen from the court in their childhood, and living in a cave of the woods, came upon "Fidele" but did not recognize in him the daughter of Cymbeline, fleeing from the court in disguise. Thinking the exhausted youth was dead, they prepared "with fairest flowers" "to sweeten his sad grave"—with "pale primrose," "azured hare-bell," and "leaf of eglantine." Then the beautiful dirge was spoken, for Polydore told his brother, "Cadwal, I cannot sing: I'll weep, and word it with thee." At this point, the class listened with interest to the lyric, but when the book was closed and the lesson ended, the surprised and aggrieved expression of their faces called for an explanation. A question brought forth a demand for "the rest of the story"! When they were reminded that a hint as to the next step had been given and told that the rest must be deferred until they should read the play for themselves, there was a doubt in the mind of the teacher as to whether or not the impression of the lyric itself had been entirely

overshadowed by the interest of the narrative, but later, when they were asked to make their own selections for memorizing, it proved that this poem was a favorite with many.

By this time they began to bring in bits of verse which had attracted their attention in magazines or newspapers. Soon, an occasional lesson period was devoted to current poetry, the pupils bringing their copies of the *Literary Digest*, which they had been using in connection with the course in history, and reading to the class some selection from the "Department of Current Poetry." They usually added some comparisons with the lyrics of the *Golden Treasury*, and sometimes this led to animated discussions. Other collections of poetry began to have some interest for them, and the boys listened to a suggestion that the *Boys' Browning* was another "treasury" of possible riches, without any evidence of feeling that a book of poetry was "out of their line." *Golden Numbers*, the charming collection by Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora Archibald Smith, also seemed attractive to them with its grouping of poems under such enticing titles as "Green Things Growing," "When Banners Are Waving," and "In Merry Mood."

The class now studied a few sonnets of Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney, and were ready to go on to Book II, where Milton was the great name. In reading the sonnet "On His Blindness" with the octave expressing his grief, and the sestet his resignation, it was plain to them how much better his rhyming plan was adapted to expressing the two moods than would have been the Shakespearean form with the closing couplet. This seemed to bring home to them the idea that poetical form was the expression of the poet's thought and not arbitrary or merely ornamental. The notion seemed to increase distinctly the respect of some for the art of poetry.

Milton's sonnet naturally brought out a reference to the times and a contrast between the Puritan period and the gay brilliance of Elizabeth's court in Shakespeare's time. But even in Book II, we found our royalist courtiers, the Caroline poets, like Colonel Lovelace, and read his lines, "To Althea from Prison":

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.

Book III brought us to Burns, with his lilting melodies which sang themselves into the hearts of the boys and girls. Those who had themselves followed the plow matched from their own experience the ruin of the "wee bit housie" of the field mouse and seemed to feel that there *was* poetry in the furrowed field and that they, too, might try to express it.

Only a few poems were read from each of the four books of the *Treasury*, and these were grouped around the one great name of the period. In the last, Wordsworth took us out of doors to listen with him to the cuckoo:

The same whom in my schoolboy days
I listen'd to; that Cry
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.

Here, too, Scott greeted them blithely with his:

Waken, lords and ladies gay,
To the greenwood haste away.

But long before Book IV was reached, the pupils themselves began to feel a desire to create. A few attempts were shown to the teacher privately and, good or bad, were accepted seriously and criticized sincerely. Others were brought in, and soon the class was told of these efforts and all the pupils were encouraged, but not required, to test their skill in verse-making. Later, a stimulus was given by the announcement that the literary editor of the annual school magazine was in search of material and would welcome original poetry. In looking back over some years of this sort of work, several young people of real poetic talent are recalled, but the greatest satisfaction of the teacher lies, perhaps, no more in these than in others who made honest attempts and, although they did not succeed in creating anything of much merit, found pleasure in the work and a new appreciation of real poetry.

A hint that the sonnet form was difficult and better not attempted seemed to be a challenge to some, and the most phlegmatic and unimaginative boy in the class volunteered a sonnet on "June" which was most unpoetical but in which he had carried out the form very well and used details which were quite amusingly true

to the schoolboy's experience of June. His line "June is no month for old cranks" was surely a humble but heartfelt echo of Lowell's sentiments on the subject!

An easy rhythm for practice in versification was suggested to them in Crashaw's "Wishes for the Supposed Mistress" of the poet's heart, beginning:

Who e'er she be,
That not impossible She
That shall command my heart and me.

One girl used it in this fashion:

Birds and bees!
Think ye the blind man sees?
No; he only hears the hum of bees.

Birds and bees!
Think ye only of these,
For they are the only ones he sees.

A little colored girl chose her own rhythm and wrote on a great theme: "Life"! She had come from the mountains of Kentucky, had endured ridicule because of the homespun style of her dress, and had persevered in her studies in the face of the discouragement of her teachers over her lack of preparation. She wrote:

Day by day, is it a strife?
Difficulties coming along in life,
Worry, struggle, and toil,
As numerous as the seed in soil?

What is life that it should be
Lonely and murmuring as
A solitary, living tree,
Left on a desert far from the sea?

Listening to the golden
Harp-strings of Beauty,
Man is ready to do his duty.
Day by day, it is not a strife;
Difficulties are only the
Pleasures of life.

This young girl would not wait to complete her course, but hurried back to her home in the mountains with the crumbs of knowledge she had greedily gathered. When we saw her again, we learned that she had been teaching a little school of colored children. Her school library consisted of every textbook she had used in our high school, with her English classics as her chief aid in sharing with these neglected little ones every bit of "sweetness and light" that had come into her own life.

The *Golden Treasury* has not been our only source of inspiration for original poetry. A lad who studied the *Old Testament Selections* was impressed by the beauty of the eastern scenes such as the one where "Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming." This boy wrote a poem called "The Mirage" which had a good deal of vividness and atmosphere. It opened in this fashion:

Slowly, swaying from side to side,
Across the burning sand,
They wend their way, a caravan,
A small and weary band.
The camels, faltering, bear the load,
The men beside them droop,
The gray of even swiftly falls
Upon the little troop.

The forest chapters in *Ivanhoe* made an occasion for ballad-writing. It was suggested that the pupils write a new Robin Hood adventure in prose or poetry, and one girl produced an excellent ballad, telling a gay little adventure in cleverly managed measure.

Bits of original verse inspired directly by the study of Palgrave's collection of lyrics have been preserved from time to time in the *High School Bulletin* or the teacher's notebook. We had our crop of spring poems, of course. One with a good deal of freshness and sweetness contains these lines:

When the world awakes from a peaceful night,
And smiles at the sun's pink glow,
O, the good God, then, is everywhere
When those first fresh zephyrs blow!

A gifted lad wrote these lines called "Dawn":

O tinted lips of distant, mist-veiled morning,
Send forth, perfumed and delicate, thy breath,
To give the fleeting night-birds hasty warning
That shelt'ring night is swiftly nearing death.

One of the last tasks assigned in the course of poetry described was the writing of a letter to a pupil in some other high school where the *Golden Treasury* was not studied, telling him about the book. These letters were very spontaneous and natural. Many spoke of the writer's dismay when he first opened the book and found it a volume of poetry when he had been expecting a novel. Then they almost invariably recorded a rapidly growing interest, and more than one said: "I have found that the book truly deserves its name. It is, indeed, a 'Golden Treasury.'"

It is certain that new ideals of truth and beauty may develop in the minds of the boys and girls, and new avenues of enjoyment be opened up to them, if their teachers can attain enough skill and delicacy of touch to help them find the riches of the treasury of the poets, their rightful heritage. Does not this period following the war call for our greatest efforts in this direction? This time of unrest, with its complex problems, requires the building up of character, the strengthening of ideals, and every incentive to high courage and noble endeavor. Assuredly, the voices of our great poets should speak to our young people today.